

For Release 06.00 GMT Thursday 15 February

WWF IN SCHEME TO BRING BACK EUROPE'S BEARS, WOLVES, AND LYNXES

GLAND, Switzerland--A new WWF initiative, involving 15 European countries, ranging from Bulgaria to Portugal, is the first ever international effort to restore Europe's beleaguered populations of large carnivores and to dispel myths that wolves, bears, wolverines, and lynxes are dangerous and undesirable pests.

"Our first task is to do some serious image-rebuilding," said Dr Magnus Sylvén, Director of WWF's Europe and Middle East Programme. "By the end of the century, we aim to have proved to farmers and local communities that many of their fears about animals like wolves and bears are excessive."

Their bad reputation has brought large carnivores to virtual extinction in most western European countries. Iberian lynx numbers are now so low that the scientific journal *Nature* has designated it the world's most vulnerable cat. Meanwhile, the region's already depleted wolf population is further reduced each year by farmers and gamekeepers who destroy litters of young cubs and shoot adults.

"There is really no need for this sort of action," added Sylvén. "In the past, when European farming activities were expanding, one saw the sort of conflict between farmers and animals that one sees now in many African and Asian countries. But now the western European agricultural scene is changing -- particularly in the more remote, mountainous areas where these animals have their last strongholds -- leaving more room for both people and animals."

Another of the new initiative's priorities is to address Europe's massive agricultural subsidy problem. For example, the Swiss government currently pays out Fr50 million each year, just to support sheep farmers.

"Subsidies like these, which also occur in Norway, encourage irresponsible farming," said Sylvén. "One reason why hill farmers lose sheep is because they buy stock using government aid, and then turn the animals out to graze, unsupervised. You'd never get a farmer doing that with animals he'd paid for with his own money!"

Nevertheless, the programme acknowledges that some livestock losses will occur as large carnivore populations increase. It therefore recommends shifting subsidies to compensate farmers who lose animals, rather than supporting the initial purchase of stock.

more.....

But livestock farmers and hunters are not the only threats to large carnivores. Habitat loss and degradation is another major problem. WWF and its partners hope that by directing conservation efforts towards animals that need large, unfragmented natural areas to survive, they will help to protect important habitat from destructive activities such as road-building and intensive cultivation.

Another bonus: in many parts of Europe there are now too many herbivores. The absence of large carnivores has led to population explosions of animals such as roe deer and red deer, resulting in damage to trees and other plants. Bringing back carnivores will redress the species balance -- a fact which is attracting foresters to the initiative.

The initiative will initially focus on mountain regions including the Carpathians, the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Rhodope mountains, along with alpine tundra, grasslands, and boreal forests in northern and central Scandinavia. Properly managed, these regions could all be important elements of the European Union's proposed Natura 2000 network of protected areas. This network will play a crucial part in enabling animals to migrate from countries such as Slovenia and Austria where they are relatively numerous, to places where they are not currently found.

The Large Carnivore Initiative For Europe has been agreed by representatives from 10 of the participating countries: Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Norway, Poland, Portugal (representing the Iberian peninsula), Romania, and Switzerland.

WWF has, in the past, been involved in a number of localized projects to bring back large carnivores to specific areas. For example it helped reintroduce lynxes to the Swiss Jura mountains, and built up a population of bears in the Lower Austrian Alps.

Ends

For more information: contact Sarah Russell on Tel: +41 22 364 9554, Fax +41 22 364 8307 or Magnus Sylvén on Tel: +41 22 364 9225.